

THE PROFESSION

a european research council (ERC) for the social sciences and humanities: pros and cons¹

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Abstract

Achievement of the full set of EU objectives in the long run requires basic and critical research in the social sciences and the humanities. A European Research Council (ERC) may offer economies of scale, the alleviation of coordination problems, and the provision of public goods or 'club goods' to the social sciences and humanities. It should focus on data sharing and large comparative projects; raising public awareness of the value of the social sciences and humanities, and funding basic and critical research in these disciplines – not just research offering immediate-term extrinsic pay-offs. In order to function properly, such a body should develop standards of assessment and peer review processes that are appropriate for research in the social sciences and humanities. An ERC must receive 'fresh money'; it must minimise transaction costs – both to attract good applicants and to fund as many of them as possible – and, by giving priority to academic excellence over Lisbon relevance and geography, it must maximise its credibility as a supporter of high-quality research. At a time when competition is supposed to foster excellence in research, academies and private funding bodies must continue to be competitors of the European Research Council.

Keywords European Research Council; Bologna; peer review; social sciences; humanities

On 6 April 2005, the European Commission accepted a proposal for the creation of a new European Research Council (ERC) to support the best in European 'investigator-driven' research (European Commission, 2005). What are we to make of the proposal? As

teachers, researchers and advisers, we should welcome an ERC insofar as it responds to the following challenge to sustainable European research in the social sciences and the humanities. When our brightest students ask for our advice on how to pursue an academic career,

where do we point? As an adviser, I am committed to furthering the interests of my students and of my discipline. I always recommend that students first pursue doctoral training at the very best university that caters to their academic interests. They should then seek careers that allow them to combine teaching and research at an institution visibly committed to high standards in both.

Alas, those of my students who heed my advice must usually leave Europe and head for the United States – often never to return. The Commission proposal correctly identifies this as a crucial challenge: ‘individuals should be stimulated to enter into the researcher’s profession, European researchers should be encouraged to stay in Europe, researchers from the entire world should be attracted to Europe and Europe should be made more attractive to the best researchers’ (European Commission, 2005: 6).

To reduce the frequency of these one-way trans-Atlantic journeys in search of excellence, European policy makers must strengthen research in the social sciences and humanities and improve the quality of doctoral education. What can the proposed ERC – working under the auspices of the European Commission and together with national research councils, academies and private research-funding institutions – do in this regard? How, together, can these bodies ensure a better match between the best interests of our best students, the best interests of the development of our academic disciplines and the best interests of Europe?

The present reflections note several causes of the present plight of the social sciences and humanities in Europe and describe some of the specific features of these disciplines that create opportunities and challenges for an ERC. They also describe the potential contributions that might be made by an ERC as well as the challenges such a body may face. The conclusion summarises the suggestions

made and the warnings given in relation to the proposed ERC, and points to some valuable contributions that may be made by academies and private-funding institutions.

CHALLENGES TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES IN EUROPE

The social sciences and humanities face at least four challenges in Europe, the first of these being the Bologna process. In its focus on higher education, the latter aims to promote European mobility and competition with the US – while forcing institutions of higher education to adopt non-sustainable strategies that involve a neglect of research in favour of teaching. Second, the Lisbon process aims to ‘improve the effectiveness of investments in education’, but focuses almost exclusively on short-term job creation and economic growth measured by the standards of economic comparative efficiency (Barroso, 2005). Unless supplemented by other perspectives, this narrow policy focus may extinguish other important social objectives to the achievement of which the social sciences and humanities may make important contributions. In particular, research on topics less directly relevant to the objectives of growth and jobs is likely to be under-funded. Third, the social sciences and humanities have been marginalised in the EU Framework Programmes (and many of the disciplines belonging to the category are likely to remain marginalised). Insofar as EU funding drains resources away from domestic sources, this situation will lead to a net loss for many of the social sciences and humanities, in violation of claims that competition brings about Pareto improvements. Fourth, the chronic public under-funding of research in the social sciences and humanities is likely to worsen with the demographic shifts that are leading to increased health-care costs for a higher

proportion of the elderly. Compensating for the low level of public funds by high student fees is rightly regarded as problematic in many European countries insofar as it threatens the cherished principle of providing access to education independently of the ability to pay.

As a consequence of these challenges, research and education in many areas of the social sciences and humanities are becoming increasingly unattractive in Europe. Such a downward turn threatens university-based research, and is increasing the significance of two brain drains: within Europe away from the research and education sector, and away from Europe to the US. Pessimists may suspect that those responsible for these developments think it would be no loss if parts of the social sciences and humanities ceased to be practiced in Europe. In response, we should re-emphasise the reasons for valuing research in these areas, and recall those of its special features that the ERC must accommodate.

SOME RELEVANT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

There are six characteristics of the social sciences and humanities that are of particular relevance to the present discussion. These are (a) the contribution the disciplines may make to enhancing the quality of human life; (b) their value to the EU; (c) their local and universal subject matters; (d) the sometimes individualistic and even solitary characteristics of their research practices; (e) their generally low cost, and (f) the particular standards of quality that can be applied to them.

(a) The social sciences and humanities make many valuable contributions to the quality of human life. Just as the natural sciences aim to provide a better under-

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standing of nature, the social sciences and humanities seek a better understanding of ourselves and our culture:

- First, they may contribute to the formation of individuals' values and character traits. Especially in the humanities, much research addresses what it means to be human, what we value and what previous generations have found reason to value. Such insights are crucial if citizens are to find and create meaning in their lives, and make sense of their existence and actions. Historical and comparative research may enable them to do this, as individuals and in community with others. We gain a better understanding of our own roles, experiences and values by systematic reflection on how others have lived their lives and valued certain practices, objects, ideals or beliefs. The social sciences and humanities can help to build solidarity and trust in other people, and identify institutional patterns and discontinuities that foster or inhibit the development of social solidarity.
- Second, the social sciences and humanities also offer critical and systematic reflection on what goals to pursue. These contributions are of value over a longer time scale. They make us aware that there are other goals

besides those of economic growth and job creation. Competitive industries that want to remain competitive must have employees who are prepared to offer leadership and present market strengths. Public authorities that seek trust and motivation among citizens also need research in the social sciences and humanities. Witness the post-Maastricht calls to alleviate the democratic deficit, showing the need for the social sciences and humanities both to diagnose the perceived problems and to prescribe solutions. Democratic contestation by opposition parties, free media and independent academics creates mechanisms that ensure that politicians pursue the best interests of citizens. The part played by academics and other intellectuals in speaking the truth to the powerful constitutes a crucial contribution of civil society to the democratic process. The fact that this is overlooked by the White Paper on Governance underscores its importance (Follesdal, 2003). To remain trustworthy, such research requires a particular kind of freedom of academics from political or economic domination.

- Third, the social sciences and humanities can be instrumentally useful. The contributions they can make often require broadly based and long-term study. Consider, as illustrations, the policy relevant insights – insights that could not have been provided without decades of less obviously ‘useful’ social sciences and humanities research – that have been offered in the following areas:
 - Islamic thought and social practices, and their impact on Europe;
 - the sources of xenophobia, and our past experiences and responses to it; and
 - the significance of memories, history and practices for present conflicts and cooperation. Examples include

the role of religion in various member states and in the Constitutional Treaty; different levels of trust in government and the challenges this disparity poses for European integration.

- Fourth, research in the social sciences and humanities has a creative and constructive role to play in contributing to policy formulation and economic growth. If it is useful in the short or long term for job creation in competitive industries, and for policy makers, many of its contributions could hardly have been foreseen when it was originally carried out. The humanities and social sciences provide know-how concerning how best to achieve given goals. This know-how includes the creation of options enabling: the discovery of new niches for products and services; more effective production; opinion research that allows companies to position themselves in markets; legal arrangements that provide sufficient predictability and flexibility; and identification of strengths that may lead to regional ‘clusters’ with comparative advantage. The social sciences and humanities also hone individuals’ abilities to assess assumptions, premises and worldviews critically; to implement organisational changes; and to learn and to retrain. Such abilities are valuable for companies that must continually prepare for competition and reposition themselves.

(b) These kinds of contribution by the social sciences and humanities also show some of the possible ways in which research in these disciplines may be of value to the EU. The Commission proposal mentions several of these (2005: 31):

- First, the social sciences and humanities can help to promote the stated Lisbon objectives of increasing the economic strength of the EU through

the development of a knowledge-based economy that offers more and better jobs. The potential contributions of much research in the social sciences and the humanities become obvious once these objectives are specified. For example, research can facilitate the creation of knowledge companies with critical employees and local customer bases, products within the fields of design and IT, cultural tourism and so forth.

- Second, the social sciences and humanities may also promote those of the broader objectives of the EU to which the Lisbon objectives are means. The former objectives, as recognised by President Barroso (2005: 5), include 'social justice and opportunity for all' as well as 'sustainable development'. Economic growth and jobs, duly regulated and allocated, are necessary but insufficient conditions for achievement of these objectives. The relationship and trade offs between the Lisbon objectives and those of the EU, as well as their optimal regulation, are topics on which research in the social sciences and humanities is urgent.
- Third, several of the EU's other objectives – including a 'Social Europe' – require research in the social sciences and humanities. How can the EU member states restructure their welfare systems in ways that maintain trust? How can the EU contribute to informed, democratic, option creation and accountability in a more democratic multi-level Europe? What is the political significance of cultural heritage and national identities? How does the public perceive the effects of Europeanisation on changes in welfare-state regimes? These are but a few of the questions to which research in the social sciences and humanities can provide answers. Trustworthy research may also help to reduce unwarranted mistrust of EU bodies among elites and the public by,

for example, determining whether the EU secures its sound objectives reasonably well. Such confidence building requires public assurance that the researchers and their institutions are not unduly dependent on EU funding.

- Fourth, responsibility for pursuit of the objectives of the EU and those of the member states must be combined and divided in ways that are, and are seen to be, normatively legitimate. This may require research on issues ranging from subsidiarity to whether there is a uniquely European way of life worth preserving. Such research tasks may go beyond the objectives of the EU, but they are still arguably important from the point of view of European governance.

(c) The subject matter of research in the social sciences and humanities is often universal, but it is also often local. In other words, though the topics studied are often universal in scope, research often sheds valuable light on the particularities of limited geographical areas, and on regional or national cultures, laws, institutions, history or practices. Such research requires that researchers have knowledge of local conditions and languages. Importantly, those in charge of ensuring the quality of the research must also have knowledge of local details, be they geographical, institutional, legal, historical or cultural. This narrows the field of scholars available for peer review.

(d) Research in these fields is often, but certainly not always, carried out by individuals working alone: it is a solitary process. This is more frequently the case in the humanities and law than in the natural sciences. Thus, authorship in the social sciences and humanities often involves only one or two people. Of course, this is not to deny that the research process often involves larger groups, or that such groups provide benefits in terms of inspiration, breadth of coverage

and possibilities for comparative research, the creation of new hypotheses, critical comments and quality controls. Still, I submit that there are good reasons to believe that much innovative and influential scholarship in many parts of the social sciences and humanities will continue to be the work of individual researchers. This means that to limit funding to large-scale projects only is to risk sacrificing much of the most innovative – and inexpensive – research in the social sciences and humanities.

(e) Compared to the natural sciences, the social sciences and humanities usually require less in terms of the use of equipment (though they usually require more in terms of field trips and access to data). Again, this is not to deny that much research requires considerable personnel and other resources. However, generally lower personnel and equipment costs means that the most important scarcity concerns time. The relatively low costs of research in the social sciences and humanities provide several reasons to insist that an ERC keeps transaction costs low and that it keeps them lower for the social sciences and humanities than for other fields. If the ERC must function with the same percentage overheads for the administrative costs of managing its funds, then the application process must be even more cost effective per grant, since the awards will be smaller. And the amount of research in the social sciences and humanities that is lost to wasteful administrative costs is higher than for other more costly research. The marginal value to researchers of the funds may not be very large, especially insofar as other sources continue to provide the modest sums required. Scholars' cost-benefit calculations therefore make them more averse to burdensome application and reporting processes, since they may have little net gain from a successful application. They are thus even more sensitive than their natural science colleagues

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about perceived administrative red tape. The review process must also seek to minimise reviewers' time, since they more often face an hour-for-hour sacrifice of their research as a result of time spent reviewing applications.

(f) In the social sciences and humanities, the standards of quality that are employed must be other than those of international journal bibliometrics. Natural scientists and quantitatively oriented social scientists have created bibliographic measures that fail to reflect the local topics, local languages and monograph traditions of the social sciences and humanities. Many of the research topics in these disciplines have a general focus, with international peer review in German, French or English. There is evidence that assessment of quality does not have to be vague: there is much intra-disciplinary consensus on how to rank contributions on the basis of methods, innovative findings or evidence. However, assessment of some research in the social sciences and humanities requires the possession of local knowledge and information. This may make international peer review more difficult and less appropriate for this type of research – though methodologies and the use of general theories may still be assessed by international reviewers. It is therefore reasonable to insist on international peer review wherever possible, while

acknowledging the limitations of this quality control mechanism when it comes to local or national studies.

It is harder to find agreement on inter-disciplinary standards in the social sciences and humanities, owing partly to the wide range of methods used in these disciplines. This creates particular challenges for inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary work. Current bibliometric measures are particularly ill suited to decisions concerning the allocation of funding across disciplines. The Hix index (2004) may be one path worth exploring further.

Given these features, research in the social sciences and humanities faces several challenges that are peculiar to these fields. Some claim that European research is dominated by several small national research institutes without critical mass. The evidence for this is hard to find. Other challenges seem more pertinent. The social sciences and humanities are under-funded, especially with regard to basic, critical research. Researchers in the social sciences and humanities face conflicting demands – including teaching, reporting procedures, application writing and evaluations, as well as public dissemination. These demands combine to reduce the time available to do research. The scarcity of continuous time may indeed be a more important limiting factor than scarcity of funding.

The social sciences and humanities are laggards with regard to quality standards, where international peer review bibliometrics has become the main game in town. Researchers therefore suffer a late mover disadvantage, as they must seek to develop alternative standards for assessing academic quality in their fields, with fewer perverse effects. The disadvantages are especially problematic when these standards are used to allocate resources not only within each discipline but also among the social sciences and

humanities – and even across all the sciences.

EUROPEAN SOLUTIONS FOR THE PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES?

For researchers in the social sciences and humanities, responses at the European – though not necessarily EU – level may be desirable for several reasons. Possible benefits may be of at least three types familiar from arguments about subsidiarity (Follesdal, 1998): higher-level action may be preferred for reasons of scale (Commission, 2005: 57), including comparative research, to respond to coordination problems or to obtain public goods or ‘club goods’ that benefit most Europeans or a specifiable subset of them. European level action may harmonise and supplement national and European research funding efforts, including those of the European Science Foundation.

European level action may foster exchanges of ideas, data and comparative research, which may also enhance research on local topics – though more such research is actually undertaken on this front than is sometimes claimed by the Commission. European level action may also foster the cross-border mobility of researchers allowing the emergence of clusters of excellence in their own fields.

European level action may provide public goods or club goods for research communities. One example is data and library sharing through, in particular, efforts to digitalise European archives extending the cooperation already underway between Oxford, Stanford, the University of Michigan, Harvard, the New York Public Library and Google (cf. <http://hul.harvard.edu>). Another important task is to increase public understanding of the several reasons to value high-quality

research in the social sciences and humanities – and perhaps especially in the humanities. Such efforts are helpful from the point of view of securing funding at national, regional and European levels, from both private and public sources. A third task is to develop measurement standards and processes, with appropriate forms of national and international peer review, that better measure and promote research in the humanities and law, at less cost and with less perverse effects, than some of the bibliometric indicators currently used in other sciences.

SOME POSSIBLE RISKS FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES POSED BY AN ERC

Before turning to how an ERC may benefit both researchers in the social sciences and humanities, and the EU, it is appropriate to point to some significant risks. An ERC may add little value, and may even be detrimental to the interests of some researchers in the social sciences and humanities.

First, an ERC may raise transaction costs by creating more bureaucratic procedures for provision of the same limited amount of resources. The Commission recognises the need to simplify access to, and participation in, the next Framework Programme (2005: 65). The threats in this regard are particularly worrisome for the social sciences and humanities. The transaction costs of application and evaluation procedures, combined with opaque award processes, can easily create a situation where European competition actually *prevents* excellence in research. There are at least six reasons why excellent researchers in the social sciences and humanities might refrain from applying for funds from the ERC on cost–benefit grounds:

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- (1) The value of the award is relatively small. Researchers might often be able to conduct much of the research even in the absence of such funding, or find other sources of funding such as private funding bodies with lower transaction costs.
- (2) Researchers must often handle much of the application process themselves, partly because of a lack of administrative support but also because the scientific quality of an application is exhibited in the detailed formulations provided in the substantive section of the application. Such onerous tasks cannot easily be sub-contracted.
- (3) The chronic under-funding of the social sciences and humanities leads to heavy over-subscription – witness the calls for proposals in the existing Framework Programmes. The chances of success are thus reduced, even for high-quality applications.
- (4) The assessment process is opaque to many researchers, especially those unfamiliar with 'EU speak', the transparency of the process for insiders notwithstanding. Political and geographical considerations also clearly play an important role in allocating contracts. The academic community often criticises the quality of successful projects, as well as the quality of assessors. The perception that current

EU support for research is problematic in this respect is self-reinforcing, ill founded though it may be. The uncertainty leads many high quality research clusters instead to apply elsewhere, to funding bodies with lower transaction costs and more credible assessment processes. In turn, well-qualified reviewers may feel that their time is wasted when they are obliged to assess mediocre applications alongside less competent reviewers.

- (5) The administrative burdens of managing EU-funded projects seem prohibitive. Experience with the current Networks and large Integrated Projects funded by the European Commission suggest that the administrative costs are very high. The costs may drain those who win, and they prevent all but the rich and powerful from applying. This in turn will privilege existing networks over newcomers.
- (6) Alternative sources of sufficient funding are available, such as private bodies – whose reputation for speedy, high-quality assessment may well attract many of the best researchers.

An ERC can hence ensure 'excellence through competition' only if transaction costs are minimised, and if it can establish and maintain a reputation for selecting high-quality projects.

Second, an unintended effect of an ERC may be a reduction in funds available for research. The total funds from national and European sources combined may diminish, in general or for particular research topics. The cheapest way for national governments to increase the level of European funding is obviously to transfer resources from national research budgets. The net resources for research may thus remain constant, and may even be reduced by the costs of another administrative layer.

In particular, a European focus may diminish funding for research on local issues that contribute to the objectives of the EU neither in the short nor the long term. We should therefore expect understandable opposition to the ERC from these researchers who find themselves and their 'national' topics excluded from European-level funding, and who face shrinking national sources due to the same ERC. These unfortunate effects may be reduced – and possibly eliminated – by emphasising the significance, in comparative terms, even of research that addresses 'local' issues.

Even so, we may expect ERC calls for applications to focus on research of direct Lisbon relevance, and not to cover many valuable forms of research in the social sciences and humanities. Thus, the Commission states that 'The objectives set out here are therefore aimed precisely at supporting the aims of the Lisbon agenda through Community funded research activities' (Commission, 2005: 58). Other valuable research topics are left with fewer resources than before. Unless measures are put in place to correct this bias, the ERC obviously threatens basic research in the social sciences and humanities, as well as much of the research that offers orientation and critical perspectives.

A further ground for worry may be that short-sighted, politically accountable authorities may not want to fund such independent, basic or critical research. Since basic research is often by its very nature a public good, it is likely to be undersupplied by uncoordinated national authorities. Such problems can be avoided if the ERC is sufficiently immune from pressures toward short-term usefulness. Critical research may be at risk unless the ERC is able to take a sufficiently independent and long-term perspective.

Third, there is a risk that funding is skewed toward the Lisbon objectives

rather than being made available according to scientific merit. Resources will be too scarce to fund all the 'centres of excellence' and 'networks of excellence' that merit such labels. The high-quality centres of scholarship less relevant to the Lisbon objectives will presumably not be labelled 'excellent'. An unintended long-term effect of this skewed pattern may well be that 'excellence' becomes devalued by scientists as yet another term belonging to the lexicon of 'newspeak'.

Finally, it is difficult to see how an ERC can avoid emphasising geography rather than quality: funds may be allocated not on the basis of scientific excellence, but to ensure a fair distribution among member states. Such priorities may be laudable insofar as Europe needs a dispersed workforce with high levels of academic training. However, it is problematic if it hinders excellent research in Europe. Unless an ERC is sufficiently insulated from national governments, its search for 'excellence' will be constrained. However, democratically accountable governments will understandably hesitate to fund an ERC with no strings attached, be they Lisbon usefulness or national benefits.

An ERC must thus seek to dispense 'fresh money', minimise transaction costs (both to attract good applicants and to fund as many of them as possible) and take steps to ensure the priority of criteria of academic excellence over Lisbon relevance and geography.

CONCLUSION: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR AN ERC, FOR ACADEMIES AND FOR PRIVATE FUNDING INSTITUTIONS

The political constraints facing European research suggest mild optimism. An ERC can help solve some of the problems that the social sciences and humanities face at the national level. However, other problems remain. It is not obvious that an

ERC will be suited to funding locally focused research, or critical and non-applied research – areas that already tend to be under-funded by national research councils. The ERC cannot be expected to satisfy researchers' expectations in this regard, but we must hope that it will be able to apply high standards of academic excellence at the European level. Still, counter pressures will be strong: governments will surely only want to commit funds if they are assured of 'useful' research carried out by researchers from their own countries.

Leaving such worries aside, an ERC may perform several valuable tasks including:

- (1) Harmonising and supplementing national and European research funding, especially to foster the exchange of ideas, data and comparative research. These initiatives may also enhance research on local topics.
- (2) Fostering cross-border mobility toward clusters of excellence. These clusters may be quite small, and an ERC should also aim to fund individual and small-group research. It is a mistake to believe that bigger is better for all research in the social sciences and humanities.
- (3) An ERC should value puzzle- or investigator-driven research, for instance, by announcing only very broad themes while leaving more specific decisions to applicants.
- (4) An ERC should seek to provide public goods or club goods. It should:
 - facilitate data and library sharing, for instance, by digitalising European archives;
 - increase public understanding of the value and quality of the social sciences and humanities; and
 - develop appropriate measurement standards and peer review processes that provide better measures and incentives for research in the social

sciences and humanities, at less cost and with fewer perverse incentives.

An ERC runs several risks that can be reduced if not avoided by sufficient independence and by procedural features that minimise transaction costs while funding high-quality research. Only an ERC that is independent in certain ways both from the Commission and from national governments can ensure that procedures of quality assessment are transparent, and that considerations of geographical spread or short-term policy relevance do not trump academic quality. The reputation of the ERC hinges crucially on these and other issues of institution design.

An ERC must avoid problems of high transaction costs, low transparency and low credibility of assessment procedures. The ERC must spend its money on research rather than on the administration of research. The administrative costs of funding research in the social sciences and humanities at the European level must therefore be kept as low as possible, while ensuring high-quality procedures. The ERC must also have sufficiently simple and transparent application procedures that even the best scholars want to compete. Procedures can easily create and maintain an adverse selection of applicants. The reputation of an ERC will suffer long-term damage if the applications are poor – giving it a deserved reputation for funding second-rate researchers.

An ERC must also have simple evaluation processes to ensure that the best scholars serve as peer reviewers. The reputation of an ERC depends crucially on its ability to identify the best applications from the pool it receives. The ERC must therefore recruit high-quality scholars as reviewers. They will surely refuse to participate in cumbersome processes with other reviewers whose reputation they question. Evaluations must therefore

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be efficient and not impose unreasonable burdens on the best scholars in the field. The ERC must attend closely to the quality of its referees, and to the procedures it applies when – if at all – political and geographical considerations are taken into account. Applicants turned down by the ERC will surely look closely at these issues.

Academies and private-funding institutions may play important roles in conjunction with an ERC. They may contribute to competition between private and public funding bodies to attract and recruit first-rate scholars. Such competition may be crucial to promoting excellence in public-funding institutions – including an ERC. Academies may provide benchmarks and scholars to act as peer reviewers and assessors of quality in project selection. They may also remind the other actors of the multiple values of research in the social sciences and humanities, including orientation, and creative and critical contributions. Academies should perhaps also be involved in the selection processes, to guard against suspicions about the possibility of skewed research findings and about agencies.

Private-funding institutions are crucial to ensure that research in the social sciences and humanities focuses on a sufficiently broad range of research topics. For instance, much basic research and research of exclusively national concern will not be funded by an ERC constrained to further the

objectives of the EU. Private funding bodies must of course contribute to projects in accordance with their mission, and may have to select shorter term, high visibility projects. However, these will be other biases than those of public funders. Private funders often have humanistic ideals that may bolster awareness at the ERC of the value of critical and independent research that reflects the multiple values of the social sciences and humanities.

Private funding bodies also continue to provide valuable benchmarks for expeditious and low-hassle application procedures with peer review. This is not to deny that their task is in some ways easier, since they face other, or fewer, public accountability requirements. However,

they continue to provide much needed alternatives, enabling good scholars to avoid the perceived weaknesses of other public funders at national and EU levels. This is especially true insofar as they offer funds with few bureaucratic strings attached; high academic standards, and recognition of the value of critical, independent and basic research.

An efficient and reputable ERC, working closely with academies and private funding bodies, may indeed foster excellence in European research in the social sciences, law and the humanities. In due course, these actors may ensure a better match between the best interests of young scholars, of the disciplines, and of Europe.

Note

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